

First record of Spotted Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna guttata* for the Northern Territory

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Abstract

The Spotted Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna guttata* occurs in the Philippines, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea and was first recorded in Australia in 1995; it is now seen regularly in northern Queensland. The first record of the species in the Northern Territory, which is also the first Australian record outside Queensland, is presented here. A single bird was observed on six occasions from 27 December 2011 to 12 February 2012 at the Leanyer Sewage Ponds, Darwin. The initial observation was made immediately following a tropical cyclone, which formed in the Arafura Sea and tracked south to make landfall east of Darwin, suggesting that the bird may have originated from eastern Indonesia rather than Queensland.

The Spotted Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna guttata* occurs in the southern Philippines, Sulawesi to the Moluccas and the Tanimbar Islands, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992; Coates *et al.* 1997). It was first recorded in Australia in 1995 when several birds were located at Weipa on Cape York Peninsular, Queensland (Niland 1996). It is now regularly observed on Cape York Peninsular, in particular in the Weipa and Iron Range areas, but with records from as far south as Wonga Beach, between Mossman and Daintree Village, north of Cairns (Wildiaries 2011). The species has also been recorded in the Torres Strait, essentially connecting the Cape York Peninsular records with its wider range to the north (BARC Submission Nos. 331 and 392). Beruldsen (2002) suggested that the species may be breeding in Australia, based on observations and behaviour of an adult pair with six juvenile birds. However, this conclusion may have overlooked the nomadic nature of the species and a local breeding event has not yet been confirmed (BARC Submission No. 319; Beruldsen 2002). The current report is the first record for the species from the Northern Territory and the first Australian record outside Queensland. This record has been accepted by the Birds Australia Rarities Committee (BARC Submission No. 750, T. Palliser, pers. comm., 16 September 2012).

A single Spotted Whistling Duck was found on 27 December 2011 at Leanyer Sewage Ponds, Darwin, Northern Territory (12°21'45"S, 130°54'33"E), and was present until at least 12 February 2012 (Figures 1–2). It was observed by the author on

six occasions between those dates (additional dates: 7, 9, 11, and 26 January 2012). Repeated visits on other dates during that time period did not produce any further records, nor did visits after 12 February 2012. The bird was generally resting close to the water's edge, but on occasion was observed preening, drinking and, when disturbed, making short flights during which it landed on the water, where it swam for brief periods before returning to dry land. Although a variety of other ducks were present, predominantly Wandering Whistling Duck *D. arcuata* and Radjah Shelduck *Tadorna radjah*, the individual often remained at some distance from these birds. During earlier sightings the bird was harassed regularly by other ducks, in particular Wandering Whistling Ducks, and appeared very nervous. During later observations, by contrast, the individual was itself more aggressive towards other ducks (Figures 3–4). The bird was flighty throughout the sighting period, and did not allow close approach; observations were generally made from a range of 100–150 m.

The bird was identified as a Spotted Whistling Duck by the prominent white spots on the flanks and breast (irregular-sized spots on the flanks; small spots scattered over the breast); grey face, eyebrow and sides of the neck; blackish/dark brown crown, nape and hindneck (black/dark brown extended onto the sides of the neck to form a partial collar); blackish/dark brown eye patch and lores; dark brown back; rich buff-rufous on the sides of the upper breast/lower neck; and dull pink legs with blackish feet. A narrow white bar on the upper tail-coverts was noticeable in flight. The bill was dark without any obvious red; there was an area of white at the base of the bill.

Wandering Whistling Ducks (Figures 2–4) were present during all observations, and Plumed Whistling Ducks *D. eytoni* were also at the site during some observations, allowing close comparison of the individual with these two species. Both of these species lack white spots, have pale brown to buff faces, have flank-plumes (short in Wandering Whistling Duck; long and upswept in Plumed Whistling Duck), and have different overall colouration (Wandering Whistling Duck has rich chestnut flanks with dark scaling on the breast; Plumed Whistling Duck is paler with broad dark bands on cinnamon outer breast to mid-flanks) (Marchant & Higgins 1990). The Lesser Whistling Duck *D. javanica*, which has not been recorded from Australia but occurs in Indonesia including the Lesser Sundas, lacks white spots, is smaller, and has an overall colouration which is similar to the Wandering Whistling Duck (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992; Coates *et al.* 1997).

The white spots on the flanks suggest that the bird was an adult; juveniles have white streaks instead of spots on the flanks (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992; Coates *et al.* 1997). However, the spotting was generally irregular and did not resemble that illustrated in guides, nor did the bill colouration, which is usually illustrated wholly or partially red (e.g. del Hoyo *et al.* 1992; Coates *et al.* 1997; Pizzey & Knight 2007). The spots are



Figures 1–2. Spotted Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna guttata*, Leanyer Sewage Ponds, Darwin, Northern Territory: 1. 9 January 2012 (Micha V. Jackson); 2. 11 January 2012 with Wandering Whistling Ducks *D. arcuata*. (Peter M. Kyne)



Figures 3–4. Spotted Whistling Duck *Dendrocygna guttata*, Leanyer Sewage Ponds, Darwin, Northern Territory, 9 January 2012, displaying aggressive behaviour towards Wandering Whistling Ducks *D. arcuata*. (Micha V. Jackson)

typically messy in this species and the bill usually appears dark at a distance, with closer observation required to detect colouration (J. Davies, pers. comm., 1 July 2012).

The initial sighting immediately followed Tropical Cyclone Grant, which formed in the Arafura Sea and generally tracked southwards, making landfall on the Cobourg Peninsula on 25 December 2011 and then in the Alligator Rivers region east of Darwin on 26 December 2011. I therefore hypothesise that the bird originated from eastern Indonesia, which lies to the north of Darwin, rather than from Queensland. Parts of the species' range, such as the Tanimbar Islands, are considerably closer to Darwin (~450 km due north) than is Cape York (~1,200 km due east), and the preceding weather patterns support this proposed origin of the bird.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the Northern Territory Power and Water Corporation for access to Leanyer Sewage Ponds, Micha Jackson for photographs and for comments on the manuscript, Jeff Davies for information on the species, Tony Palliser and the Birds Australia Rarities Committee for appraising the record, and to Don Franklin and an anonymous reviewer for comments on the manuscript.

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